Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957): Rethinking literary modernity in Colonial Punjab

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Introduction

This special issue of Sikh Formations developed out of a scholarly workshop entitled *Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957): Rethinking Literary Modernity in Colonial Punjab*, that was held at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in August 2017 and organized by the issue coeditors, Anshu Malhotra and Anne Murphy.[1] It marked an important milestone.[2] The workshop program included both prominent and emerging scholars from the following institutions: in India, Ambedkar University Delhi, Punjabi University Patiala, Guru Kashi University, and Delhi University; in the United States, from Trinity College, University of Mississippi, and the University of Michigan; and from the University of British Columbia (where the workshop took place), three graduate students and one faculty member; the Director of the National Institute of Panjab Studies and the Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan in New Delhi also attended. Three recent graduates from UBC and Kwantlen Polytechnic University (Surrey, BC, Canada) with Bachelor's of Arts degrees also participated in a special student panel.[3] The workshop thus represented a crosssection of the new work that has been undertaken in Sikh and Punjab Studies in North America and in India.

Bhai Vir Singh as author, scholar, and reformist

For many Punjabis in India, as well as scholars of Punjab, the name Bhai Vir Singh is synonymous with Punjabi literary production and Sikh religious reform. He was a major force in shaping Sikh and Punjabi culture, language, and politics in the undivided Punjab, prior to the partition of the province in 1947 with the formation of the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan. He was a prominent exegete and scholar of Sikh scriptures and literatures, and a historian. He was also sympathetic to the reformist project of the Lahore Singh Sabha. From a young age, Bhai Vir Singh (hereafter, BVS) recognized the significance of press and publication in carrying forward the vast array of messages that he wished to convey to a 'Sikh public'. In that sense, BVS was not only alert to the possibilities of 'print capitalism,' but was ready to both mobilize and shape the imaginative and aesthetic potentialities of this new medium of expression. In 1891, he jointly with Wazir Singh set up the *Wazir-i-Hind* Press in Amritsar, for which he penned many a reformist tract through the vehicle of the *Khalsa Tract Society*, founded in 1894; in 1899 he began the newspaper *Khalsa Samachar* in support of the same cause. Publication of the journal *Nirguniara* started in 1893; it initially carried his varied religious and creative publications. BVS, it must be remembered, also successfully ran the business of a printing press, keeping it commercially viable. Later he was also a founding director of the Punjab and Sindh Bank, established in 1908. His literary and social activity continued: after independence/Partition, BVS was a nominated member of the Punjab Legislative Council in 1952 and a nominated member of the National Academy of Letters in 1954. The Government of India awarded him the *Padma Bhushan* honor in 1956 (G. Singh 1972).

BVS's scholarly and literary commitments can be seen to follow from his family history, although he also brought innovation to his role. He was born in Amritsar in a family of scholars. His father, a medical practitioner, was also a scholar who translated Kalidasa's *Shakuntalā* into Punjabi. His maternal grandfather, Bhai Hazara Singh, was a scholar of Sanskrit and Persian, and penned the *Gurū Graṅth Kosh*, a dictionary for the Guru Granth Sahib, and wrote a commentary on the work of Bhai Gurdas. Hazara Singh's collaboration with colonial scholars like M.A. Macauliffe are well known (G. Singh 1972). As an inheritor of North Indian cosmopolitan linguistic affinities, BVS was trained in Persian, Sanskrit and Braj, but was also particularly open

to the possibilities that the modern Punjabi vernacular offered in literature and print. BVS' choice of Punjabi as a vehicle for his writings and politics, was deeply shaped by the emerging identity politics of colonial Punjab. The Punjabi nationalist and Arya Samaji leader Lala Lajpat Rai, for example, trained himself to write and speak in Hindi, in order to adhere to the Arya Samaj's language politics, even though, to begin with, he was more proficient in Urdu and Persian. (Rai n.d.) The Punjabi language, of course, had a wider connect to Punjabi peoples, as Farina Mir's (2010) work has shown. The Punjabi language press, which printed mainly in the Gurmukhi and Perso-Arabic (known today as 'Shahmukhi') scripts, and to a lesser extent Devanagari, flourished in nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Punjab. The suturing of modern Punjabi in Gurmukhi to Sikh identity was strongly tied to Singh Sabha politics of the period, and in this domain, BVS holds a prominent place. BVS can thus be said to have shaped the formations of modern Sikh theology and political culture, but also the modern formation of the Punjabi language in India itself (Shackle 1988). He dedicated his intellectual life to promoting Punjabi as a language of literature and as a modern language of print, lending it a particular form and envisaging it as an emotive symbol of Sikh identity.

As BVS worked to develop and promote modern Punjabi as a language of journalism and literature, he tested, adopted, and experimented with a wide range of genres and forms, many of which are addressed by the essays in this Special Issue. As an author, he was active as a poet, novelist, exegete, theologian, historian, journalist, and pamphleteer. He was, as has been mentioned, extremely active in the dynamic emerging print culture of late nineteenth century colonial Punjab; foremost among the genres and forms he worked in, therefore, is the tract literature he participated in producing, publishing, and distributing on a broad scale. This work sought to shape understanding and experience of modern Sikh identity, with a focus on women, and simple story-lines acted as a pretext for restructuring social lives in an emerging middle-class (Malhotra 2005). Also of enduring importance were the historical novels for which he is well known: *Suṅdarī* (1898)*, Bijay Siṅgh* (1899), *Satwant Kaur* (1900; 1927), and *Bābā Naudh Siṅgh* (1907, 1921), some of which were – like many fictional works of the period in Urdu and other languages – first published in serialized form, linking his fictional and journalistic output. *Suṅdarī* in particular has often been hailed as the 'first modern Punjabi novel,' although its genre affiliations are complex, with oral and performative features and ties to historiography imbedded within it (Murphy 2012, ch. 4; Malhotra, present volume). Such complex legacies and influences are typical of early fictional work in South Asia; Meenakshi Mukherjee (2006, 596) has written of the 'plural heritage'of the novel, and in Jennifer Dubrow's (2016, 290–1) more recent description, 'the Indian novel was not only reinterpreted on the ground, but also itself emerged from the ways that late nineteenth-century writers overlaid indigenous literary traditions with their own reinterpretations of the genre' (See also Orsini 2009, 163 ff.). In BVS's case, his novels cultivated an imaginative space for the playing out of history, as we detail later in this introduction – history as a past that feeds the present – and the historical consciousness his novels deployed drew in complex ways on Sikh precedents, within also a colonial frame (Murphy 2012, ch. 4). Through his novels, he blurred the line between historical fact and creative fiction to find a springboard for a desired Sikh future. Of a strikingly different mode are BVS's scholarly annotations, editions and exegesis, e.g. the monumental fourteen volume editing of Santokh Singh's *Gur Pratāp Sūraj Graṅth*, Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prāchīn Paṅth Prakāsh*, and the *Purātan Janamsākhī*. These foundational works speak of his central role in shaping modern Sikh textual studies and exegesis, and the self-conscious historicist basis of Sikh identity-making in the early decades of the twentieth century (Murphy 2012). He engaged in modernist-biographical work in his *Srī Gurū Nānak Chamatkār*, *Srī Kalgīdhār Chamatkār* and *Srī Ashṭ Gurū Chamatkār*, relating sacred lives in an accessible language and presenting a re-presented 'tradition' to Sikh audiences that they could admire and emulate. His poems that won him numerous awards and literary recognition took up more universalist themes; they were also the most self-consciously 'modernist' genre that he engaged in, eschewing Braj (which was at the beginning of BVS's career still a poetic language of choice) and traditional poetic forms and meters. His poem and lyric collections include *Dil Taraṅg* (1920), *Lahīrāṅ de Hār* (1921), *Maṭak Hulāre* (1922), *Bijlīāṅ de Hār* (1927), and *Mere Sāṅīyāṅ Jīo* (1953). These poetic works move beyond utilitarian and strictly identitarian formulations, demanding that we take seriously the full range and complexity of BVS's work.

The seven essays and Afterword presented in this special volume showcase these complex facets of BVS' writerly work, and we are happy to present here the sophisticated and insightful scholarship that is currently taking place on this important figure. Reexamination of his work and complex influence is necessary, given the now dated nature of much earlier work. Some of the earliest work on BVS fit him into 'western' categories and broad rubrics of history and representation, in order to make his work legible to western audiences,

and make him inhabit a coveted western modernity. Thus, Ganda Singh (1972) referred to BVS as an initiator of 'Sikh renaissance,' and Harbans Singh (1972) represented varied Sikh movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as imitative of western forms: he spoke of the Nirankari movement as Puritanism; Namdhari as militant Protestantism, the Singh Sabha as revivalism and renaissance, and the Panch Khalsa Diwan as aggressive fundamentalism. Such nomenclatures ignored the specificity of Indian colonial formations, whether the emerging affiliative politics, or the economic, social and cultural conditions that provoked particular responses. Other early work was largely hagiographical or semi-hagiographical in nature. Even when scholars used keen analytical skills to understand his personage and influence, they felt compelled to dwell on his persona as part of their analytic. Thus, Harbans Singh at various points drew attention to Vir Singh's own mystical experience even as he spoke of the mysticism apparent in his oeuvre, for example within the epic poem *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* (Singh 1972, 53). Similarly, in his foreword to Singh's book, J.S. Neki emphasizes Vir Singh's nature as that of a 'spiritual and elevated soul' (Singh 1972).

Overall, scholarly accounting of Bhai Vir Singh and his work as a modern writer and publisher has been contradictory. In this way, he has been treated much like Bharatendu Harishchandra of Banaras, a prominent Hindi-language author commonly regarded as both a founding father of modern Hindi literature, and a major defining voice in the framing of Hindu interests in the first half of the nineteenth century. While Bhai Vir Singh is generally seen as quintessentially modern, particularly in literary terms, he is like Harishchandra also perceived to be 'traditionalist' because of his religious commitments (Dalmia 1999, 49). Vir Singh's 1905 poetic work, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, mentioned above, has for example been described by Sant Singh Sekhon as 'largely modern in form' but 'oriental' and 'premodern' in spirit, with its 'stress on otherworldliness' (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 124). In similar but perhaps more generous terms, Christopher Shackle (1998, 183) has noted with reference to that work that the author 'is able to draw naturally upon the still living traditions of the past…[and] recast these in the then still emerging language of the present'. Less generously, Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal (1992, 110) note that Vir Singh's devotion to Sikh thought and religious philosophy 'submerged the thinker in him, and bound him down to what he inherited in the Sikh tradition'. Yet elsewhere in the same work, they say he 'upheld the torch of modernism in Punjabi literature' (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 109).

Histories and modernities

The tension highlighted by earlier scholars between the 'modern' and 'traditional' in BVS, however, has not provided a lens of lasting value for understanding his work. Bhai Vir Singh's Sikhism was very much modern, as Mandair (2005, 2009) has shown, and his vision of the Sikh past was no less so (Murphy 2012). At the same time, his work was grounded in pre-existing forms of knowledge production. BVS's dexterity in switching among, and being seriously engaged with, multiple genres is an index of his commitment to undertaking the complex and multifacted labor of his time. The versatility of his work in terms of genre and content, highlighted above, may reflect his commitment to Sikh identity-making: this urgent task could only be completed through multiple genres/approaches, which each allowed for different kinds of things to be said and different kinds of audiences to be reached. This, however, does not well account for his more universalist, and simultaneously personal, poetic works, for which he is perhaps best known in purely literary terms. It is more valuable, therefore, to see BVS in relation to the literary and scholarly traditions he emerged from, which were multi-lingual in their commitments and capacious in their moorings in terms of form and genre. From that perspective, we can account for the breadth of his work and its complex ties with both new and pre-existing forms of knowledge production.

The essays presented here also move beyond the 'tradition' vs. 'modernity' binary, to take up specific projects of BVS across the genres he wrote in. Thus, Arti Minocha in the opening essay discusses the emergence of print publics in colonial Punjab, arguing that the Punjabi public 'ecumene' was not merely imitative or derivative of western public forms, but had its own specificities and hybrid cultural practices that allowed for the construction of new subjectivities, and the burgeoning of new modes of agency, concepts through which we can study BVS. Further, she comments on the Introduction that BVS wrote to his massive editorial work of Santokh Singh's *Suraj Prakash*, to understand BVS' concept of 'history', and the hermeneutics that opened up when he self-consciously engaged it. While BVS was in dialog with the idea of history as developed in Europe, his philosophy of history was not entirely empiricist, nor did he set to create opposition between history and mythology. Minocha argues that BVS' conversation with the past, the 'truths' history was meant to expound and discover, included elaborating the anecdotal, the popular, spiritual, miraculous and the mythological. In other

words, history could uncover different types of truths and modernity could flow from east to west; in so doing, Indian histories and modes of representation could 'provincialize Europe' (Chakrabarty 2000).

The question of history/ies, and its relationship to modernity/ies will come up repeatedly in the essays in this volume. That is because 'history does not just refer to events and processes out there, but that it exists as a negotiated resource at the core of shifting configurations of the social worlds' (Banerjee-Dube and Dube 2009, 9). The meaning, authority, and power derived from engaging with this resource were important in the shaping of public debates in colonial Punjab. The past could be invoked, accessed, used, discarded, excised, appropriated, and more, in order to shape the present, make it meaningful, mold lives here and now. Further, as Chakrabarty (2015) has more recently shown, the interleaving and inter-animation of 'cloistered histories' (with its western academybased credentials) and 'popular histories' (imaginary, mythological, insistent) at the genesis of the emergence of disciplinary history in India, is visible in the myriad forms through which BVS engaged with history-writing. In his scholarly and hermeneutic work of representing and organizing Sikh pasts to fulfill presentist needs, and his fictional labours where he often collapsed different story-telling modes (including history), BVS simultaneously indulged in writing cloistered histories, as he rendered their popular versions. As he did this, as Murphy (2012, ch. 4) has shown, BVS's historical interests reflected the broader dynamics of history writing in colonial India at the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

BVS' discursive politics of history worked in the interests of constructing a 'Sikh' community. While the idea of community invokes primordiality, and is often seen as opposed to modernity, in the context of colonial Punjab, it was the compulsions of engaging with specific features of colonial governmentality that compelled the move towards more fixed notions of community, reflecting the broader tensions in colonial governance that foregrounded communitarian social organization in nascent representational forms. However, fixing the unruly and the fluid was neither an easy task, nor a necessarily successful one. BVS himself, a prime advocate of the boundedness of communities, which would be unambiguous in the interests they shared and symbols they exhibited, floundered in actually achieving it. The impermeability that he at least intellectually hoped to achieve, was not always possible, not even in his work which on the surface belabored that point, as some of our essays demonstrate and Murphy (2012) earlier showed in her analysis of the formulation of the *prajā* or 'people' as a social category that surpassed religious identity in *Sundarī*. However, he did centrally and increasingly over time work towards that end, as Harjeet Grewal's essay here explores.

Focusing on to BVS's textual-historical work, Grewal describes how the efforts of BVS and other Singh Sabha stalwarts, as well as colonial bureaucrat-scholars, led the *Purātan Janamsākhī* to be presented as the *ur*-text that detailed the 'biographical' narrative of Nanak's life (1926). Several aspects of this process reveal how western historical and scholarly patterns came to impinge on the selective way *Janamsākhī* materials came to be fashioned: such as an obsession with origins of texts and lives, the narratological framework in which these could be presented, and the incorporation of the linear life-pattern as against, if not cyclical, then at least the embedded multiple narrative voices which were now excised and rationalized (the disapprobation of the Nanak companion Bala's voice for example). The process of excision, selection, elision, grammatological intervention, and paratextual commentary, Grewal shows, not only guided the now silent reader engaged with the text to apprehend it in particular ways, but also contributed to the making of a specific Sikh identity under the aegis and patronage of the colonial state and the modern identity politics it unleashed. The 'historicist mode of event-based narrative' that became the *Janamsākhī*, also meant that the world of orality and performance, whose continued relevance Minocha discusses, was suppressed in the 'autodialogic' mode opened by new reading practices between the ideal Sikh reader (whether in Punjab or the diaspora) and his/her *Puratan* text, for Grewal. The world of polyphony, or multivocality, did not disappear, as we have been noting in this introduction and as some of our essays here underscore; however for Grewal, it was at this time that the notion of an ideal text as of an ideal reader of the text came to be constructed.

In another essay that foregrounds multivocality, Julie Vig discusses questions of intertextuality, context and content in BVS's biographical *Sri Kalgidhar Camatkār* (1925) through analysis of distinct representations of an event portrayed within it and three other texts written at different times. Linking the *Camatkār* to the *Gurbilās* literature, which Murphy defined as creating 'a community around the memory of the Guru,' Vig concentrates on how the Battle of Bhangani (1688) [when Guru Gobind Singh resided within the districts of the hill chiefs Fateh Shah of Garhwal and Bhim Chand of Kahlur] came to be inscribed in the *Bachittar Nāṭak*, attributed to the tenth Guru himself, the *Gursobhā* of Sainapati (1708), Koer Singh's *Gurbilās Patshāhi Das* of the late eighteenth century, and in BVS's Camatkār. The pre-battle context moves from questions of hunting and

royal privilege in the first two texts, to that of marriage and familial honor in the third, to BVS' emphasis on war strategies, and the treachery of five hundred *Paṭhāṇs*, the Mughal king Aurangzeb, and the hill chiefs. Vig tells us about the centrality of questions of family honor and family feuds in the late eighteenth century; and one may speculate that the anti-Muslim and anti-Mughal bias of BVS reflected his investment in eighteenth century history as the temporal location for the true unfolding of Sikh identity formation. Vig also comments on, following Louis Fenech, how in BVS's rendering what came to be seen as 'Hindu' and 'Puranic' elements, such as the battlefield with its teeming bloodthirsty goddesses, demonesses and demons, came to be excised. In his desire to present an ideal Sikh past, populated by model Sikhs, BVS took it upon himself to tell a particular story of the Guru. Vig alerts us to how earlier texts written in Braj Bhasha and verse, change with BVS to Punjabi and prose. At the same time, BVS's version is often interspersed with quotations from earlier texts, used judiciously to lend authority to his own version, a practice one sees in BVS's fictional work as well. Vig shows how a'chain of receptions' accumulate around what Purnima Dhavan has called 'affective communities' that the intertextuality of the event creates in the *Camatkār*. Vig allows us to see the specific elements of past narrations that BVS eliminates, reorders, or alternatively, uses the authority of the past to emphasize.

Gender representations

Many of BVS' novels also can be considered 'historical fiction' and are situated in the past. What is also a concern of these novels and the many tracts he wrote, was the question of restructuring gender roles, and 'reforming' women. He portrayed women as instrumental to the achievement of an authentic religious identity, and worked alongside reformers elsewhere in India who sought to reorganize women's domestic roles to fashion multiple middle-class agendas, and to lay a new stress on confining women to remodeled ideal homes (Malhotra 2005). However, his writing on women had an added imperative: to block the fluidity and porosity between Hindu and Sikh women's identity, to prevent the program of culling a separate Sikh identity from coming undone. In this context he often portrayed the agency of women as vital to the cause of the reformed Sikh; this was construed in both negative terms, such as through the figure of the 'unreformed woman' who encouraged Sikh ambivalence towards religious identity, and more positive ones, defining the 'reformed' Sikh woman's role in bringing her men to the call of community (N.G.K. Singh 1993, ch. 7; Malhotra 2002). In this way, BVS was typical of his time: as Anshu Malhotra (2002) has shown, the tract literature of this period, with many of the KTS tracts written by BVS, was highly regulatory in its approach to women, setting up almost-impossible ideals, and then chastising women for not fulfilling them.

Gurpreet Bal has thus called his first novel *Sundarī* (1898) 'the culmination, objectification, and justification' of reformist Singh Sabha identity formation (2006, 3533), reflecting its commitment to reformist ideals and the identification of appropriate Sikh practices. BVS's other novels, *Bijay Singh* (1899), and *Satwant Kaur* (in two parts 1900 & 1927) further carried these themes forward, attempting to outline ideal behavior for Sikh women, often for women who became Sikhs only recently through a process of conversion. His novels went on to cater to the needs of the diasporic Sikh community in places like America, Canada and Singapore, who utilized the novels' moral lessons to shape and protect Sikh identities in these places. So successful was BVS in his venture of writing historical fiction to build Tat Khalsa Sikh identity, that by 1972, his novel *Sundarī* had gone through 42 editions totaling more than a million copies (H. Singh 1972). Young women in the diaspora were taught the ideals of Sikh women through his novels as Christine Fair has shown, demonstrating the continuing relevance of BVS's work for a global community (Fair 2010).

Two essays in this volume discuss the varied aspects of the novel *Suṅdarī* underscoring how the novel continues to be read, even as it continues to impact diverse audiences in India and the Diaspora. Anshu Malhotra does a detailed reading of the novel, exploring its form, and the circularity of the text, in the myriad, and sometimes contradictory, messages it conveyed. Despite pushing for a separate Sikh identity for men and women that the novel overtly attempts, the result, in fact, is far more ambivalent than it seems from the surface. Sikhs must become distinct from Hindus the novel suggests, but the Sikhs are also portrayed as being related to and similar to Hindus. Likewise, women are indicted in the novel as the cause of ersatz *Sikhi*, indeed for its present state of degeneration; but they are also portrayed as Sikhi's hope, capable of lifting men out of the confused morass that is their present state of religion and ritual practice.

Malhotra delineates some lesser known and discussed aspects of *Suṅdarī* She points to the embedded genealogical story of BVS' ancestor Kaura Mal in the novel, pointing out how the relationship between the Hindus and Sikhs is explored in *Suṅdarī* through the complex relationship between the good Hindu/Sikh Kaura

Mal, and the egregious Hindu Lakhpat Rai. She also indexes the transformation of the folksong on which partly the story of *Suṅdarī* is based (specifically its first chapter), and the violence it renders to women's folk genre at the hands of BVS. This occurs in some measure because of the imperatives of writing in prose and bestowing his novelistic characters specific caste and religious characteristics. Malhotra also discusses the central trope of conversion, its portrayal as legitimate by BVS in certain instances (Hindu to Sikh), and as illegitimate in others (Hindu/Sikh to Muslim) in the novel. Finally, she shows how the obsessional concern around preserving Sikh/Hindu women's chastity in the novel, is discursively utilized to portray more generally, Sikh people's purity and morality. Malhotra also comments on the historical imagination at work in the novel, specifically pointing out how ideas of origins of communities, and the colonialist notions of universalist religions with its particular symbols was deployed by BVS.

In another essay, Doris Jakobsh builds on Fair's work to show what she calls a 'third' life of *Suṅdarī* today (after its first publication in the 1890s and a second one in the 1980s in the Diaspora) in the pixelated form of an animated film, and the innovations this new avatar brings. Jakobsh focuses on the innovations that BVS introduces around religious symbols and rituals that would mark Sikh women as distinct through the novel *Suṅdarī*. What were in fact controversial, and by no means settled practices around women, were experimented with by BVS in the novel. Thus, women are incorporated within Sikhism through the *amrit* ceremony, as Sundari is at the time of her conversion to Sikhism in the novel. Women's names are also suffixed with the title of 'Kaur' after their names, as Sundari, viz. Sundar Kaur is in the novel. However, as Jakobsh demonstrates, neither practice becomes settled until the 1950s; not even in the novel, where Sundari is the preferred manner of referring to our heroine rather than her more formal title. In the pixelated version, further experimentation is undertaken. Sundari gets to be dressed in the Nihang blue, and she sports a turban. The turban is particularly interesting, as women sporting a turban was a controversial suggestion in the late nineteenth century, and not endorsed by BVS (Jakobsh 2003). Sundari, in the novel, wears the traditional *dupatta* and not a turban, Jakobsh points out, a garment she uses to even dress the wounds of an injured Muslim. The visual impact of the animated Sundari, that blurs the line between imagination and reality, and simulates events that in fact did not occur, is significant, as Jakobsh shows.

Suṅdarī then provides a template for continued experiments and tests on women's religious identity and investment in symbolic markers that would set the Sikh women apart. As in the colonial period, women emerge as the bearers of cultural identity (Malhotra, 2002). The fact that novels like *Suṅdarī* were a part of the curriculum in schools like the *Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya* at Ferozepur, set up by Singh Sabha leaders like Bhai Takht Singh, underscores the heavy onus of reformist demands on women (Manchanda 2010). Women's agency in BVS novels is incumbent on their adhering to and imbibing the reform programs built around them.

Religious, moral, and personal transformation

A trope that repeatedly appears in BVS' fictional writing is that of 'conversion'. Malhotra has recently discussed the importance of the theme of 'conversion' in Punjabi literary and historical imaginaries, in general, in the context of her work on the Muslim courtesan and Gulabdasi spiritual seeker Piro (Malhotra 2017, ch. 3). The theme appears across almost all of BVS's creative works. Conversion may appear in his writing as one of religious makeover, e.g. from Hindu to Sikh, or through threat of conversion to Islam; the latter allows the playing out of ideal Sikh characteristics of bravura and undiluted love for *Sikhi* and its symbolic paraphernalia. But BVS also portrays moral, spiritual and even physical aspects of conversion within individual characters. In his play *Raja Lakhdata Singh* (1910), here discussed by Gunjeet Aurora, what one may call a manner of 'conversion' is the awakening to the duties of a Sikh feudal leader, the *Raja* or the King towards his Sikh subjects. Aurora discusses the didactic play, where BVS portrays the various communities of Punjab in competition, in the race towards progress and modernity, with the fear that the Sikhs were being left behind. Aurora notes that BVS does not indulge in vilification of other communities, but only pushes for the education of Sikhs as a panacea from various ills that plague the community, including addiction to intoxicants. However, it is significant to note that the 'awakening' of the Raja takes place in the background of a Sikh orphan being taken for conversion to Christianity by a padre. While Aurora does not discuss the salience of the historical parallel that BVS may have had in mind, it is important to point out the historical context in which he was writing. The incident of four Sikh boys' putative (or threatened) conversion to Christianity in 1873 at the Church Mission School, Amritsar (BVS's alma mater), which led to the establishment of the Singh Sabha, is well known (G. Singh 1972). BVS can be said to use the incident to once again arouse his people to moral responsibility as

enacted by Lakhdata towards the end of the play, to which Aurora draws our attention. However, equally of interest, though again not the focus of Aurora's discussion, is the failed conversion of a Hindu pandit to Sikhism, who is depicted as then being taken away by a padre to convert. The competitive community politics of the Punjabi colonial publics and associational politics, and its optics, were clearly on BVS' mind. There seems to be a complex imaginary regarding conversion in BVS' work. An interesting aspect of it is the depiction of Hindus, who sometimes in his writing appear as almost the 'original', yet religiously and symbolically 'unmarked' inhabitants of India.[4] This community is represented as a populace that can be attracted to one faith or the other – Sikhism, Islam, Christianity – as discussed by Malhotra– but who do not themselves 'convert' others. Such a portrayal was at odds with the public conversion controversies that organizations like the Arya Samaj created around the turn of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, to which BVS undoubtedly was reacting (Jones 1989; Adcock 2012). The notion of conversion, in its multivalent dimensions, needs to be noted and taken account of. Aurora, also points to, and critiques, the lack of women characters in the play, except a widow. The widow motif emerges in other works by BVS, such as *Rana Surat Singh* (1905), *Baba Naudh Singh* (1921), and many of his tracts. While it is true that both questions of conversion and widowhood occupied a significant space in the public and print discussions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Malhotra 2002), the manner in which BVS utilized and deployed these tropes requires further research and discussion. The widow as a single and vulnerable woman, gave opportunities for being 'converted' to various agendas of the reformers, as Malhotra has underscored in her work (2002), and was a character that haunted them through the late nineteenth into the twentieth century. Also ubiquitous in BVS's writing is the character of a holy figure, a *sant*, who inspires reform, and a spiritual cleansing, as in *Raja Lakhdata* and *Baba Naudh Singh*, and, in other works, a conversion to ideal Sikh behavior. BVS, of course, must have had the inspirational figures of the Sikh Gurus in mind with the constructing of such characters; but such figures could also resonate with a figure like Gandhi, a 'holy' man capable of bringing spiritual and societal transformation.

There are other ways to imagine conversion, not only between discrete communities but also as a transmutation of human experience in more fundamental terms. This dimension of transformation is vividly portrayed in BVS's novels, through figures like Sundari and Satwant Kaur, and the figures in these novels whose conversion transforms them both physically and spiritually. Zameerpal Kaur Sandhu, whose essay here appears in Punjabi (with a substantial translation in English), explores the transformative dimensions of BVS's poetry that invoke nature in its myriad forms. She makes a case for his sensitivity to contemporary issues of ecological and environmental preservation. Undoubtedly attitudes that looked upon nature and its many bounties as sacred and therefore as worthy of worship as of preservation, worked against its destruction, depletion, and overuse. Following this line of thinking, Sandhu links BVS's poetry to eco-critical theories that have become important in our present Anthropocene age when human activity has changed the very nature and existence of earth and threatens the future of all its inhabitants. We can perhaps see a link in this commitment to the natural world and the human experience of it, to the fundamental transformation BVS highlights in his exploration of conversion, in the deeply personal, life-altering experience of religious awakening that runs as a theme through many of his creative works. Mohinder Singh's Afterword briefly traces the career of BVS from the time of his emotive investment in a separate identity of Sikhs to his more universal poetic output which lyrically spoke of nature, providing a sense of the overall trajectory and commtiments of this complex thinker.

Closing

In his myriad writings, BVS both popularized and clarified his ideas on what constituted Punjab's religious communities and their distinguishing characteristics, reflecting a broader sense of the urgent need for Sikhs to establish their separate identity. This was seen to be of crucial importance in the colonial political and public sphere, where competing community claims were seen to decide the social, cultural and economic fate of Punjabi peoples within the logic of colonial governance. At the same time, he experimented with creative forms like the novel, and modernist poetic work. There is thus no denying that BVS has shaped Sikh and Punjabi cultural production and religious life in important and enduring ways, and is an important figure to study if we are to understand the emergence of modern Sikh identities and modern Punjabi literary production in the twentieth century. Understanding of this figure, then, allows a fuller view of the emergence of the modern in South Asia in broad terms, particularly with reference to Punjab and Sikh traditions, and allows for a more textured understanding of the shape of both modern Sikhism and Punjabi literary work in the present.

Notes

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2. The workshop in particular represented an important milestone in the study of Punjabi literature, culture, and history, and the Sikh religion, in Canada. A volume published in 1988 presented the results of a landmark conference at the University of Toronto in 1987 (O'Connell, Israel, Oxtoby 1988); Punjabi and Sikh Studies was in the same period established at the University of British Columbia. Controversy emerged soon after, when a number of activists in the Sikh community took issue with the work of then-Chair of Punjabi Language, Literature and Sikh Studies at UBC, Professor Harjot Oberoi, whose work questioned current understanding of the relationship between Hinduism and Sikhism (e.g. Oberoi 1994; on these controversies in broader context, Tatla 1999, 82–83). This constituted a major setback to the study of Sikh and Punjabi traditions at UBC and in Canada. The last decade, however, has seen the resurgence of the UBC program in Sikh and Punjabi Studies, with rising enrollments in language, history, and culture courses and a graduate program with students working towards the M.A. and Ph.D (see: blogs.ubc.ca/punjabisikhstudies).
3. The students presented papers they had previously completed for a Directed Reading course in the Department of Asian Studies at UBC.
4. In her analysis of the Nehruvian era calendar art Patricia Uberoi shows how the Hindu community is often represented as 'unmarked' as against the Muslims, Sikhs and Christians (Uberoi 2006, 116). Such representation seems to have an earlier history.

Disclosure statement

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